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Statement submitted by Make Mothers Matter, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Early Parenting and Early Child Care and Education to break the inter-generational dimension of poverty

As the world moves beyond 2015, and towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, what has become increasingly clear is the importance of early child development to the long-term success of families, communities, countries and a peaceful and sustainable world.

Joan Lombardi, Senior Advisor, Bernard van Leer Foundation, Early Childhood Matters

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank have long highlighted the central role of Education and Early Childhood Development across all United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hunger, malnutrition and ill health, often tied to poverty, unfortunately obstruct education, which is key to the eradication of poverty. So, this on-going spiral in turn perpetuates more poverty.

A solution to this conundrum requires a trans-generational perspective on poverty, which looks at the cause and effect chain across generations, and examines how interventions in one generation can avoid harm being perpetuated in future generations. And nowhere is the evidence more conclusive than interventions providing support and education for mothers, especially during pregnancy and throughout their children's early years.

The Scientific case for Maternal Health and Early Childhood Education and Care

Neurosciences have recently confirmed that a baby's brain development is shaped by their earliest experiences, including during pregnancy. In particular, a baby's exposure to stress from any cause within the family, such as parental mental illness, mistreatment, domestic violence, or simply neglect or poverty-related stress, can significantly affect their brain development. On the other hand, loving relationships and care, nurture and early stimulation support a healthy brain development and increase the chances that the child will develop harmoniously and achieve their full potential later in life.

In other words, early parenting and early child care and education can have a lifelong impact on a child's mental and emotional health and affect their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development — starting with their readiness for pre-school. Evidence in developed countries shows that a child who is not ready for pre-school education is less likely to succeed later in primary and secondary education.

If the importance of a healthy lifestyle, good nutrition and health during pregnancy and early childhood is well recognized, the potential impact of a mother's mental and emotional health on her children's future outcome is not yet fully acknowledged and integrated enough into policy making.

The Social and Economic cases for Maternal Health and Early Childhood Education and Care

Further, the benefits of early childhood care and education extend to society as a whole. Such "positive externalities", include reductions in crime, and lower expenditures on health care and on remedial education. A number of economic studies have shown that investing in early parenting and early childhood care and

education is 5-6 times more effective than intervening to solve problems later in life. (1)

In October 2016, The Lancet launched a new Early Childhood Development Series that highlights the high cost of inaction and the need to support families to provide nurturing care from the very start of a child's life. "The burden and cost of inaction (in the area of maternal physical and mental health during pregnancy, and early childhood care) is high. A staggering 43% of children under five years of age — an estimated 250 million — living in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of suboptimal development due to poverty and stunting. The burden is currently underestimated because risks to health and wellbeing go beyond these two factors." (2)

And long-term outcomes go well beyond the health of mothers and children today. Investing in maternal health and early childhood development and targeting the most disadvantaged families could have an impact on the future prosperity and stability of a country. It could potentially help break the inter-generational cycle of poverty, foster well-functioning families, and ultimately bring about fairer and more peaceful communities and societies.

Early Parenting matters and mothers' empowerment is key

Early parenting is key since parents, both mothers and fathers, or caregivers, provide the immediate physical, emotional and cognitive environment that will be the foundation for a child's development.

Moreover, mothers' education and empowerment matters: the 2007 UNICEF "State of the World's Children" Report notes that "gender equality produces a 'double dividend': It benefits both women and children. Healthy, educated and empowered women have healthy, educated and confident daughters and sons". The World Bank also found that women reinvest an average of 90% of their income in their families, vs. 30-40% for men: mothers are more likely to use their economic resources on food, education and health care for their children, thus creating a path out of poverty.

Therefore, Make Mothers Matter calls on all governments to:

1. Recognize the importance of these critical early years for child development, especially between conception and age 3, and make it an investment priority and a key long-term strategy for the eradication of poverty

2. Develop national cross-sectorial policies for educating and supporting mothers and fathers in their caring roles, especially during pregnancy and these early years, to ensure that babies benefit from protective, loving, nurturing and stimulating environments and relationships.

3. Recognize that the unpaid work of caring for a newborn baby or a very young child is essential but also time consuming, and address the resulting time poverty that limits many mothers engagement in income generating activities — notably through the development of targeted public infrastructure and services, but also through cash transfer programs.

Early Childhood Care and Education — staring during pregnancy — and empowering mothers and other caregivers in the essential role of upbringing children is the best investment a country can make. Not only it is a matter of child rights, but it will be key to the realization Goal 1 — Eradicating Poverty, and more generally the 2030 Development Agenda.

Notes:

(1) For example:

- Healthy Pregnancy and Healthy Children: Opportunities and Challenges for Employers — The Business Case for Promoting Healthy Pregnancy — AOL's WellBaby Program, USA has shown that preconception care can save as much as $5.19 for every $1 invested
- The Costs of Perinatal Mental Health Problems report — London School of Economics, 2014 — estimates that the costs to the public sector of perinatal mental health problems in the UK is about £8.1 billion/year, 72% of which relates to the child, and that it is 5 times the cost of improving services.

(2) Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale, The Lancet, October 2016

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